

# The Food Police

Jayson L. Lusk

Living in a cultural melting pot, Americans have long taken their culinary cues from other societies. A night on the town typically means a visit to the tastes of Italy, France, or Thailand. If there is any food distinctly American, it is fast food; a food geared toward satisfying the palette and wallet of the everyman. Against a backdrop of increasing concerns about food safety, health, and the environment has emerged a new phenomenon in American cuisine – the food elite.

A chorus of writers and food advocates has emerged to remind us of the joys of fine food, good health, and connecting with our land and animals. From Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, Alice Waters, Mark Bittman, Martha Stewart, and many other bestselling authors, chefs, and food critics, we are now taught that food that is more local, organic, slow, natural, and unprocessed is better tasting, healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable. The views of the food elite, the cultural movers and shakers when it comes to food, now entrenched in institutions such as *Food Network* television, supermarkets such as *Whole Foods*, and the *New York Times* Style section, are slowly becoming etched into the conscious of the American food consumer.

But, if your food choices were once largely personal preferences, they are now increasingly seen as political actions. According to Severson (2010, p. 29), famed food activist and restaurant owner Alice Waters believes that, “that the most political act we can commit is to eat delicious food” produced in a way consonant with her vision of the world. Bestselling author Michael Pollan (2006) tells us that shopping at Whole Foods is “a much headier experience, one with complex aesthetic, emotional, and even political dimensions.” As food writer James McWilliams (2009) puts it, “buying local is a political act with ideological implications.”

While the federal government has long played a hand in influencing consumers’ food choices, its reach is extending in new and unprecedented directions. For decades, food and agricultural policy was primarily aimed at issues related to the volume of food production – to ensure affordable food and profitable farmers. In recent years has emerged an agenda to regulate what we eat and how farmers operate to ensure healthy consumers, farm animals, and ecosystems.

The movement to regulate choice – of which foods consumers buy and what farmers’ raise and plant – is becoming pervasive. Michelle Obama’s White House garden was a symbolic nod granted to a growing reality of a food movement that seeks more control over the Nation’s dinner plates. For example, Severson (2010) quotes Alice Waters who wants, “a total dispensation from the president of the United States who will say, ‘We need a curriculum in the public school system that teaches our kids, from the time they are very little, about food and where it comes from. And we want to buy food from local people in every community to rebuild the agriculture.’” She says that we, “*must* get Obama to understand the pleasures of the table.” Michael Pollan (2008) wants to, “require that a certain percentage of that school lunch fund in every school district has to be spent within 100 miles.”

The calls for regulation extend far beyond re-organizing classrooms and school lunches. Barry Popkin, professor of nutrition at University of North Carolina, for example, wants to, (2008), “change our eating pattern . . . through taxation.” He says that, “Taxing the added sugar in beverages is a favorite strategy of mine.” But, taxing “bad” ingredients simply isn’t enough to achieve the outcomes desired by some food advocates. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration required mandatory labeling of trans fats on food labels in 2003, and cities such as New York and Philadelphia subsequently banned the use of trans fats in restaurants. And now, trans fats information isn’t enough either, as witnessed by recent federal efforts to remove the ingredient from the list of items generally recognized as safe (GRAS). Buried deep inside the recently passed Health Care bill is a requirement that restaurant chains now provide nutritional information on menus. And if caloric information isn’t enough, Susan Dentzer, former PBS news correspondent and current editor-in-chief of *Health*

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*Affairs*, wants to change our eating habits by creating a “broadbased set of interventions comparable in scope to the four-decade assault on smoking.”

Food elites not only want to change what is on the fork but what is on the farm. Regulations dictating which inputs farmers’ can and cannot use are on the rise. At least six states now tell farmers how large the sizes of their cages must be if they wish to produce eggs, pork, or veal. The Food Quality Protection Act of 1996 stripped farmers of the ability to use certain pesticides. Farmers in many countries, and now Jackson country Oregon, are prevented from using genetically engineered seeds.

U.S. livestock producers are facing increasing political pressure to reduce the use of certain antibiotics and growth hormones. Indeed, meat and livestock producers are at the heart of a whole set of controversies and proposed regulations. McWilliams (2012) summarized well the prevailing cultural view, “The industrial production of animal products is nasty business. From mad cow, E. coli and salmonella to soil erosion, manure runoff and pink slime, factory farming is the epitome of a broken food system.” Writing in *TIME* magazine, Walsh (2008) concluded that, “that giving up that average 176 lb. of meat a year is one of the greenest lifestyle changes you can make as an individual.” Such sentiments are behind efforts to further regulate and tax meat and livestock production for environmental and health reasons.

Taken in isolation, any of one the regulations seem reasonable and well-intentioned, and each involves a seemingly innocuous tussle over the relative costs and benefits of the policy in question. However, if one takes a step back and looks at the big picture, it is increasingly clear that food policies are increasingly motivated by narrow ideological agendas rather than projected economic consequences

To listen to the debates over whether more food should be produced locally or whether farmers should use genetically modified seed, it is apparent that something more is at stake than costs and benefits. As John Donvan (2010) of ABC News put it when moderating a debate about the merits of organic food held at New York University, “What strikes me about this debate is that the tone here is as bitterly partisan as anything that’s happening in Washington. And I’m curious about why that is. And it’s on both sides. It’s also from all of us here in the hall. There is a nasty feeling to this issue.”

Much of the “nastiness” or controversy in modern food production results from the emerging clash of worldviews about how food should be produced and consumed. Lurking in the background is a difference in worldview that is centuries old: a divergence in the belief of the ability of government in general, and food elites in particular, to better steer food production and choice than the free interactions of farmers, agribusinesses, and consumers in the marketplace.

The average grocery shopper and even the fashionable “foodie” is largely unaware of the undercurrent driving the modern food movements, but the food elites recognize what is at stake. As one activist farmer put it, “The free market has never worked in agriculture and it never will.”<sup>1</sup> Even a casual reading of the bestselling books on food and agriculture reveal an explicit disdain for capitalism. Michael Pollan (2008) writes of, “another example of the cultural contradictions of capitalism – the tendency over time for the economic impulse to erode the moral underpinnings of society.”<sup>2</sup> Stan Cox (2008), a scientist at the Land Institute, opines about the state of modern agriculture when asserting, “If we find no alternative to capitalism, the Earth cannot be saved.” Bestselling author and nutritionists, Marion Nestle (2007), is “increasingly convinced that many of the nutritional problems of Americans—not the least of them obesity—can be traced to the food industry’s imperative to encourage people to *eat more* in order to generate sales in increase income in a highly competitive marketplace.” In fact, the modern slow food movement grew from “intellectuals on the political left who were . . . supporters of communist ideology” (Lotti, 2010). The food elites have found the problem underlying our modern food dilemmas, and it is free choice and capitalism.

In *The Food Police*, Lusk (2013) critiques the emergence of this food progressivism—the movement to adopt centralized, top-down decision making to regulate food production and consumption to achieve improved human health, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Often missing from the perspective of the food police is detailed, firsthand knowledge of modern agricultural and food production. The movement toward food progressivism is predicated on a romanticized notion of food and agriculture coupled with a poor understanding of economics—of how people’s free choices in markets provide information, serve to efficiently allocate resources, and disperse power, and how hard it is for top-down regulation to do better.

The growing “food movement” has prompted a renewed interest in food and agriculture. This is a positive development and has created many entrepreneurial opportunities. It is encouraging when consumers use the power of their wallets (and in some cases their back yards) to get the kinds of foods they desire. However, somewhere along the way, positive marketing focusing on quality turned into fear marketing, denigrating conventional agriculture often using shaky science and poor economics. As a result, perspectives are being formed by a culture that has generated a misleading picture about the state of food in America. There is a vast under-appreciation of the unintended consequences and costs of many of the fashionable food policies that currently being advocated, and as a result, consumers and voters are distracted from more substantive food issues.

1 The quote is from George Naylor in Pollan (2008).

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The over-arching solution to many of the food problems offered by the food elite is a return to nature – a kind of romantic traditionalism. This is movement that is largely a reaction to technological change in food and agriculture. Fears about modern technology have distracted attention away from what other people—who have different incomes and preferences—pay for food. There is a common view in which all was good about food and agriculture sometime in the 1940s-50s. Agribusiness takeovers or bad government policy led to the problems we now face, and new policies must engineer a return to the “good ole days.” This is sheer romanticism with very little grounding in the facts of working on a 1940’s farm. Farmers of that era eagerly adopted time saving innovations, leading to increased productivity and lower food prices (Ogle, 2013; Lusk 2013b). The food abundance Americans enjoyed is not because we cooperated with nature. Our abundance is a triumph of human ingenuity over nature’s indifference to us.

A potential danger imbedded in the worldview of the popular alternative is romanticism with nature and the past. Modern, technologically advanced food is rejected in favor of older, slower, more “natural” food. This mindset is potentially destructive because how we view our future affects not only who we are but what we become. According to the economist Deirdre McCloskey (2010), we are incredibly wealthy today not so much because of the industrial revolution and capitalism per se but because of changes in how came to *think* about commercialism, private property, innovation, and trade. Aspirations are more than wishes - they affect who we become.

A worldview that celebrates naturalism in food as a core tenant is one inherently hostile to innovation, growth, and progress even if they reduce poverty and bring about improved food safety, quality, health, and environmental outcomes. There is a call to reject biotechnology, growth promotants, irradiation, cloning, synthetic fertilizers, and all kinds of mechanization and processing in agriculture. Each of these developments admittedly have risks and downsides, but they can also make food more abundant, more convenient, more consistent, sometimes less reliant on input use (especially labor), and sometimes more environmentally friendly.

We seem to have forgotten the achievements of our efficient and safe food system. It is not a perfect system but has led to the greatest prosperity ever witnessed in human history and has allowed us to feed an ever growing world better, less expensive food.

## **A DIGRESSION ON CURRENT TRENDS IN MEAT MARKETS**

As indicated, recent years have witnessed a constant barrage of studies, books, and media critical of animal agriculture. The negative publicity is multifaceted and ranges from concerns about animal welfare, health impacts, food safety, climate change, environmental impacts, wa-

ter usage, and food security, among other issues. How much impact, if any, has this had on consumers’ demand for meat, dairy, and eggs?

To indirectly address this issue, it is useful to look at collected by the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) on Personal Consumption Expenditures. The BEA reports total expenditures on food at home in a variety of categories going back to 1959. These data are used to calculate the share of total expenditures on food eaten at home attributable to beef, pork, poultry, eggs, and dairy products.

There was a remarkable downward trend in the allocation of consumers’ food budgets away from dairy and beef from 1959 till the early 1990s, and an uptick in share of food dollars allocated to poultry. Consumers went from spending about 12-14% of their food budget on beef and another 12-14% on dairy in the early 1960s down to about 5-8% on each in the early 1990s. Stated differently, consumers just about *halved* the proportion of their food budget going toward beef and dairy in a 30 year time period.

There were many reasons for these changes. These industries became much more productive and prices fell, so consumers could allocate less of their budget to these items but still consume the same amount or more. The price of poultry fell much more rapidly than the price of beef, and thus some of the downward beef trend reflects substitution away from beef toward poultry. There were other consumer concerns during that period related to cholesterol, saturated fat, *E. coli*, and other issues that led to less consumption of beef and dairy.

Despite all that, it is remarkable how resilient meat demand has been over the last 20 years in light of the large amount of aforementioned negative publicity. The trends in the shares of food expenditures allocated to animal products from the more recent time period from 1993 to 2013 are essentially flat. Consumers are allocating just about the same amount of their food budget to beef, pork, dairy, poultry, and eggs today as they did 20 years ago. It may be the case that all the aforementioned negative publicity in recent years will eventually cause consumers to allocate their food budget away from animal products. But, at least so far, it does not seem to have had much of an impact.

None of that implies those consumers today are not eating less meat—particularly beef and pork. However, the recent reduction in consumption is not a result of a change in the amount consumers are willing to pay, but rather are a reflection of recently rising prices. Real retail beef and pork prices are higher now than they have been in at least 15 years. Cattle and hog prices have recently been near historically high levels. These upward trends started in about 2010, and the rate of increase has been faster for beef than for pork. Over the same time period, chicken prices have remained relatively constant, and are actually slightly lower in real terms today than in the early 2000s. What has caused the run-up in beef and pork

prices? The causes are multifaceted, but what follows are a few conjectures.

The answer probably does not lie on the demand side. As previously indicated, despite all the negative publicity for meat products, historical data from the BEA and recent monthly data from the Oklahoma State University Food Demand Survey suggests relatively stable to slightly increasing demand. Higher demand will tend to pull up prices, but these data suggest it is unlikely that the demand increases are anywhere near large enough to explain the recent price increases. Increased demand for meat products from other countries might tell part of the story, and although there has been a general rise in beef exports in recent years, this factor also does not seem substantive enough to explain the trend.

That leaves supply-side issues. Cattle inventories are at their lowest level since the 1950s. Because of technological advancement, fewer cattle are needed today to produce the same amount of beef as in, say, 1950. Still, fewer cattle numbers means less beef, and less beef supplied means higher prices. Contraction in cattle supplies can be explained by a number of factors, such as drought in the plains states that limited the amount of grass and hay available and higher feed (mainly corn) prices due to drought and ethanol policies, which pushed more cattle to slaughter several years ago, leading to smaller inventories today. Feed prices have recently come down off their highs but cattle prices are still rising, partially because producers are holding back breeding stock to rebuild inventory. Nevertheless, if high feed prices were the answer, one would have expected chicken prices to rise in tandem with beef and pork (at least in the short term until inventories adjusted), but no such trend is apparent in the data.

It is also worth noting that on the supply side, the beef industry has stopped using technologies that previously generated more meat from each animal. The industry largely moved away from using lean fine textured beef (LFTB) in March 2012. It has been estimated that not using LFTB is akin to reducing the cattle supply by about 1 to 1.5 head million annually (Pruitt and Anderson, 2010). If so, removal of LFTB had an effect of further reducing supply on top of the other aforementioned factors. Pruitt and Anderson (2010) estimate that removal of LFTB increased ground beef prices by about 3.5%.

In addition, the cattle industry also moved away from using the beta-agonist, Zilmax. According to the product's manufacturer, Zilmax added 24-33 lbs of additional hot carcass weight. Multiply 24-33 lbs by millions of head of cattle, and that is millions of pounds of beef that are

now "missing" relative to a year or two ago. Although removal of LFTB and Zilmax appear very different beasts than drought and ethanol policies, the effects of all have been the same: to reduce the supply of beef available to consumers.

For pork, there is currently much concern about the porcine epidemic diarrhea virus (PEDV), which kills young pigs. It is yet unclear what effects PEDV may be having, but speculation suggests it might be tightening supplies and pushing up pork prices. This is a relatively recent phenomenon and cannot explain the 2010-2011 pork price increases, but it might explain some of the recent rise.

In sum, animal production industries are facing a confluence of challenges. Strategic thinking, innovation, and change will be necessary to weather the storms.

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